

1/3/24 Wednesday

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Epstein Files Unsealed: What Have Highly-Anticipated Docs Revealed?

WASHINGTON (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Southern District of New York has unsealed hundreds of documents connected to accused sex-trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, identifying multiple individuals, some of which include prominent politicians and notable public figures.

The court began uploading [the filings](#) to public records systems late Wednesday, although heavy online traffic initially prevented access to the release.

Last month, a federal judge ordered the release of nearly 200 names tied to the Epstein case, although two people requested their names remain sealed for the time being, due to the possibility of physical harm. The names include accusers and witnesses in the case.

Epstein, a convicted sex criminal, died in 2019 while awaiting trial on new sex trafficking charges. The disgraced figure's ties to a number of celebrities and politicians from his work in the financial sector has fueled continued speculation about potential new ties to his alleged criminal activity.

The latest filings include excerpts of depositions with former British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell and Virginia Giuffre, who previously accused Maxwell of facilitating her sexual abuse after being introduced to Epstein, among other witnesses. Maxwell was sentenced in 2022 to serve 20 years in prison on a variety of charges, including sex trafficking for her involvement with Epstein's criminal doing.

The unsealed documents do not specifically include a list of Epstein clients. It also does not directly equate named individuals with committing crimes. Additional names are expected to be released on Thursday.

Bill Clinton & Donald Trump

The court filings revealed that a witness had claimed that Epstein once indicated that former US President Bill Clinton, who was named over 50 times in the legal documents, favors "young" girls.

The witness was identified as Johanna Sjoberg, who was allegedly recruited by Maxwell and went on to corroborate allegations made by Giuffre regarding the sexual abuse she experienced under Epstein and his associates. Sjoberg's deposition was held in May 2016.

"Did Jeffrey [Epstein] ever talk to you about Bill Clinton?" Sjoberg was asked during testimony.

"He said one time that Clinton likes them young, referring to girls," she replied.

In another section of the documents, Sjoberg noted it was known Clinton "had dealings" with Epstein, but that he hadn't been spotted at Epstein's infamous island in the US Virgin Islands, where it's alleged many underage girls were abused. Testimony from Maxwell relayed that she unaware as to how many times Clinton had flown on Epstein's plane.

Clinton has previously said he was entirely unaware of Epstein's "terrible crimes."

It was also detailed that former US President Donald Trump was never seen at Epstein's home or private island. In separate questioning, Sjoberg said she had never given any sexual favors or massages to the former president.

However, she did note in her deposition that Epstein appeared to brag about his ties to the former commander-in-chief, suggesting he could call Trump and "go to the casino" that the pair had once visited.

Not long after walls closed in around Epstein's operations and charges were filed in the matter, Trump relayed to the public that he was never a "fan" of Epstein and that he hadn't spoken to him for years.

Celebrities & Notable Figures

Among the dozens of named figures were musician Michael Jackson, who was spotted at Epstein's Palm Beach home, and magician David Copperfield who partook in one of the financier's parties.

While it was pointed out that Jackson hadn't appeared to entertain any illegal behavior, Sjoberg did testify that Copperfield appeared to inquire about Epstein's operation during a party. In fact, Sjoberg recalled that the magician had "questioned me if I was aware that girls were getting paid to find other girls."

Asked whether Copperfield had specifically mentioned "teenagers" or allude to any "specifics" of Epstein's criminal activity, Sjoberg said he had not.

In response to a follow-up question, the witness detailed that Frederic Fekkai, known as a hairstylist for celebrities, had been named-checked by Epstein. "I heard him [Epstein] call someone, and say, Fekkai is in Hawaii. Can we find some girls for him?," she recalled.

When questioned about her own reaction to the mention of Fekkai at the time, Sjoberg responded: "Well, I was massaging and I didn't have a reaction. I tried to remain reactionless the whole five years."

Elsewhere in the deposition documents, actors including Leonardo DiCaprio, Cate Blanchett, Kevin Spacey, Cameron Diaz and Naomi Campbell were mentioned in passing during questioning on notable persons that may have come in contact with Epstein's operations. However, the witness in each instance said they never met any of the characters. "I would hope I would remember," was one response when asked about Blanchett or DiCaprio.

In another portion of the deposition, notable scientific figure Stephen Hawking was identified in an email by Epstein, where he appeared to call on Maxwell to buy-off any associate's of Giuffre to disprove her claims - one that he alleged suggested Hawking played a role in an "underage orgy."

While the new release does offer some new details of Epstein's operations, it also rehashes previously known ties between the New Yorker and his associates, such as Prince Andrew and lawyer Alan Dershowitz.

Prince Andrew, who previously settled a lawsuit with Giuffre in 2022 but has refused to admit any wrongdoing, was described in one appearance where the UK royal placed his hand on a witness' breast during a photo with Giuffre and Maxwell.

As for Dershowitz, who has been linked to Epstein for years and appeared to earlier [welcome](#) the release, testimony showed he had been name-checked by a Jane Doe and alleged to have had sexual relations with the individual when she was a minor. Giuffre had filed a lawsuit against Dershowitz but withdrew it in 2022 after admitting to a case of mistaken identity.

Another [previously named-dropped figure](#) is Jean Luc Brunel, a former modeling agent with long ties to Epstein and who was found dead inside a jail cell in 2022 while awaiting sex trafficking charges.

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Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's approval rating had been dropping throughout 2023, even before the October 7 Hamas attack; however, since the surprise attack, he has shed nearly half of his remaining support.

The vast majority of Israelis want the prime minister out of office once the Palestine-Israel conflict is over. A new poll in Israeli media found that only 15% of Israelis continue to support the politician.

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The Japanese Coast Guard Turboprop plane that collided with a landing Airbus A350 was not given permission to take off, according to a transcript released by Japanese authorities on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the Coast Guard plane and Airbus collided on the runway of a Tokyo airport. All 367 passengers and 12 crew members of the Airbus survived the crash, but five of the six people on board of the turboprop plane were killed, with the captain surviving after suffering major injuries.

The captain has said he was given permission to take off, but the transcript shows he was instructed to taxi to a waiting area and that he acknowledged the call.

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The state of Ukraine's arms in the ongoing conflict is a clear example of a "logistical nightmare" as much of the military equipment the Kiev regime was given from its supporters "wasn't working in the first place," international relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda told Sputnik.

On Tuesday, it was reported in German media that Ukraine only has a few German-supplied Leopard II tanks remaining in operation. The issue was blamed on a lack of available spare parts for repairs.

According to Sleboda, Ukraine will face similar issues when it comes to NATO-supplied F-16s, which "will soon be decorating the steps of Zaporozhye, right alongside the Bradleys and the Leopards."

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US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that the situation at the border with Mexico is an "unmitigated disaster" of President Joe Biden's own design.

Johnson made the remarks during a trip with 60 other Republicans to the US-Mexico border to "see firsthand" the unfolding crisis.

The trip to Eagle Pass, Texas, comes as the Senate engages in negotiations in hopes of striking a bipartisan deal.

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Pro-Palestinian protesters disrupt California State Capitol session, force lawmakers to take recess

Footage from the scene showed dozens of demonstrators chanting "ceasefire now" as various flags and banners were hung within the main hall

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Microsoft Introduces Copilot Key for AI-Generated Conversations With Assistant

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) – US tech giant Microsoft announced on Thursday that all future Windows PCs will come with a keyboard featuring a new Copilot key that enables AI-generated text conversations with a virtual assistant.

"Today, we are excited to take the next significant step forward and introduce the Copilot key to Windows 11 PCs," the software maker said in a press release. "Nearly 30 years ago, we introduced the Windows key to the PC keyboard that enabled people all over the world to interact with Windows. We see this as another transformative moment in our journey with Windows where Copilot will be the entry point into the world of AI on the PC."

The press release calls the introduction of the Copilot key the first significant change to the Windows PC keyboard in over 30 years and says it will make the AI transformation experience for users easier.

The new AI-powered Windows PCs, including upcoming Surface devices, will be available for purchase starting in late February. As soon as next week, Microsoft will present its PCs with the new key at the CES conference in Las Vegas.

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US Education Department Staffer Resigns Over Biden's Support for Israel - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) – A US Department of Education staffer has publicly resigned in protest of US President Joe Biden's support for Israel's war on Gaza.

"I cannot represent an administration that does not value all human life equally. I cannot stay silent as this administration turns a blind eye to the atrocities committed against innocent Palestinian lives, in what leading human rights experts have called a genocidal campaign by the Israeli government," Tariq Habash, a special assistant in the Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, wrote in a letter to US Education Secretary Miguel Cardona on Wednesday.

Habash, a Palestinian American who also volunteered in Biden's 2020 election campaign, said he could not remain "quietly complicit as this administration fails to leverage its influence as Israel's strongest ally to halt the abusive and ongoing collective punishment tactics" toward Gaza's population.

His resignation marks the second public departure in the US federal government over Biden's support for Israel. Veteran State Department staffer Josh Paul, who worked on arms transfers to foreign countries, resigned in October.

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Epstein Case Witness Says Never Saw Trump at Sex Criminal's Home, Private Island - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A witness interviewed as part of a lawsuit involving alleged sex trafficking by financier Jeffrey Epstein said that they never saw former US President Donald Trump at the convicted sex criminal's home or private island, according to a new court filing.

On Wednesday, a US federal court released numerous documents that include the names of witnesses and accusers tied to Epstein's case.

A witness was asked during sworn deposition whether they had ever seen Trump at Epstein's home, on his private island in the Caribbean Sea or at any other location the financier frequented, one filing said.

The witness replied that they had never seen Trump at any of the listed locations, to the best of their memory, the filing said. A witness also denied ever having given massages to Trump, another filing said.

Epstein died in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges. The financier's relationship with many celebrities and officials fueled speculation about their potential involvement in his alleged criminal activities.

One witness, whose testimony was also included in the newly released filings, said that Epstein told them that former US President Bill Clinton likes "young" girls.

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US Air Force Invests \$48Mln in Next Generation Multi-Domain Sensors - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Applied Research Solutions has received a US Air Force \$48,750,000 contract to develop multi-domain, multi-platform, and multi-scale technologies for more advanced sensors, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Applied Research Solutions [of] Beavercreek, Ohio was awarded a \$48,750,000 ...contract for research and development," the release said on Wednesday.

The contract provides for the development of multi-domain, multi-platform, and multi-scale technologies and strategies to apply closed-loop sensing, data processing, and reasoning capabilities to support autonomous sensors operating across the full range of military operations, the Defense Department explained.

Work on the contract will be performed at Beavercreek, Ohio, with base support at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio over the next five and a quarter years and is expected to be completed by April 2, 2029, the Defense Department said.

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US Special Operations Order Nearly \$480Mln in Advanced Radio Equipment - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has ordered almost \$480 million worth of advanced radios for use in tactical operations from L3Harris Technologies, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"L3Harris Technologies [of] Rochester, New York was awarded a ...contract with ...a potential maximum value of \$479 million for the continued procurement of next generation tactical communications radios ...in support of USSOCOM," the release said on Wednesday.

Under the contract, L3 Harris will also provide sustainment and support services for the communications equipment as required, the Defense Department said.

The contract was awarded under the Competition in Contracting Act exception to full and open competition and USSOCOM at MacDill Air Force Base in the US state of Florida will oversee its implementation as the contracting activity, the release said.

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Epstein Case Witness Claims Bill Clinton Likes Girls 'Young' - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A witness in a lawsuit tied to alleged sex trafficking by Jeffrey Epstein claimed that the financier once said that former US President Bill Clinton likes young girls, according to court filings.

"Did Jeffrey [Epstein] ever talk to you about Bill Clinton?" the witness was asked during testimony, transcribed in a filing released Wednesday. "He said one time that Clinton likes them young, referring to girls," the witness replied.

On Wednesday, a US federal court unsealed numerous names linked to the Epstein case. Epstein, a convicted sex criminal, died in 2019 while awaiting trial on new sex trafficking charges.

Epstein's ties to celebrities and politicians has fueled speculation about their potential involvement in his alleged criminal activities.

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US Court Begins to Unseal Names Linked to Jeffrey Epstein Case - Filings

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Southern District of New York began unsealing names of people linked to a lawsuit involving alleged sex trafficking by Jeffrey Epstein, according to court filings.

The court began uploading the filings to public court records systems on Wednesday evening, although heavy online traffic is inhibiting access to the documents.

Last month, a federal judge ordered the release of nearly 200 names tied to the Epstein case, although two people requested that their names remain sealed for the time being, due to the possibility of physical harm. The names include accusers and witnesses in the case.

Epstein, a convicted sex criminal, died in 2019 while awaiting trial on new sex trafficking charges. Epstein's ties to a number of celebrities and politicians from his work in the financial sector has fueled speculation about potential ties to his alleged criminal activity.

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US Voters View Economy as Most Important Issue in 2024 Presidential Election - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Likely voters in the United States view the US economy as the most important electoral issue heading into the 2024 presidential race, according to a new Rasmussen Reports poll.

An overwhelming majority of likely US voters, 94%, believe that economic issues will be important to the election, a report on the poll said on Wednesday.

Nearly one-quarter of respondents, 23%, said that the economy will be a "very important" issue, the poll report said.

Likely voters view the economy as more important than national security or immigration issues, the poll report added.

The poll surveyed 1,007 likely US voters from December 26-28. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Pro-Palestine Protesters Disrupt California State Capitol, Singing 'Ceasefire Now' - Post

SAN FRANCISCO, January 4 (Sputnik) - Pro-Palestine demonstrators in California disrupted the legislative session at the State Capitol, singing 'Ceasefire Now' and causing lawmakers to take a recess, internet personality Collin Rugg said.

"Pro-Palestine protesters in California step up their game, start singing 'Ceasefire Now' at the California State Capitol," Rugg said on Wednesday in a social media post.

Rugg said the protesters wore N95 masks while initiating the singing of 'Ceasefire Now.'

"Lawmakers were forced to go on recess as the group disrupted the assembly floor session," Rugg added.

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Justice Dept. Sues Texas Over Law Allowing Police to Arrest Migrants Entering US Illegally

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US State Department announced that it has sued the state of Texas in order to stop a new law allowing police to arrest migrants suspected of crossing the US border illegally.

The law, which is set to come into effect in March, states that police officers can arrest migrants due to illegal entry anywhere in the state of Texas.

In addition, local judges can order migrants accused of illegal entry to leave the United States.

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Biden Convened National Security Team on New Year's Day on Red Sea Crisis - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden gathered his national security team on New Year's day to address the situation in the Red Sea, a senior Biden administration official said.

"The president convened his national security team on the morning of New Year's day to talk about the entire situation in the Red Sea, to discuss options and discuss a way forward," the official said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) said that several merchant ships in the southern Red Sea had been attacked by ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis, adding that no damage had been reported.

Last week, the USS Gravely shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles in the Red Sea in response to a Houthi attack on the Singapore-flagged ship Hangzhou of Danish shipping company Maersk, CENTCOM said.

Later in the week, the commercial vessel Hangzhou was again attacked by the Houthis, CENTCOM said, adding that US helicopters sunk the attacking vessels.

The Houthis have intensified their attacks on cargo ships carrying goods to Israel and vowed to continue attacking until Israel ends its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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Blinken to Embark on Mideast Trip Thursday, Including Stop in Israel - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken will travel to the Middle East on Thursday to visit several countries and the trip will include a visit to Israel, a senior Biden administration official said.

"Of course, we have Secretary Blinken heading out to the region. I think he leaves tomorrow night as well for stops in a number of countries, including of, course, Israel," the official said on Wednesday.

Earlier on Wednesday, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said that Blinken will visit Turkey on January 6.

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Trump Wins Support of US House Republican Leadership Team With Emmer's Support - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump secured the endorsement of the full House Republican leadership team, after Majority Whip Tom Emmer announced his support in a statement.

"It is time for Republicans to come together in support of a leader who has what it takes to get

our country back on track. We stand together to endorse Donald J. Trump for President,” Emmer said on Wednesday in a joint statement, alongside other members of the Minnesota Republican congressional delegation.

Trump has also received endorsements from House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik and House Speaker Mike Johnson.

Emmer’s endorsement comes less than two weeks out from the Iowa Republican caucus, which will be the first nominating contest in the 2024 presidential election cycle.

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UPDATE- Trump Asks Supreme Court to Overturn Colorado Decision to Disallow Him on Ballot -Filing

(Updates in Paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Attorneys of former US President Donald Trump have asked the US Supreme Court to intervene after Colorado's recent decision to bar him from the 2024 primary ballot, court documents showed.

"The question of eligibility to serve as President of the United States is properly reserved for Congress, not the state courts, to consider and decide. By considering the question of President Trump’s eligibility and barring him from the ballot, the Colorado Supreme Court arrogated Congress’ authority," wrote Trump's attorneys in the petition for Writ of Certiorari.

A spokesperson for the Trump campaign, Steven Cheung, released a statement regarding the filing later on Wednesday.

“Crooked Joe Biden’s comrades, including the Colorado Supreme Court and CREW, a radical, left-wing activist group, are doing all they can to disenfranchise all American voters by attempting to remove President Trump, the leading candidate in the 2024 Presidential Election, from the primary ballot. Democrats are obsessively violating the American voters’ Constitutional right to vote for the candidate of their choice. This is an unAmerican, unconstitutional act of election interference which cannot stand. We urge a clear, summary rejection of the Colorado Supreme Court’s wrongful ruling and the execution of a free and fair election this November,” said Cheung.

On Tuesday, Trump's legal team has appealed his disqualification from Maine's presidential primary ballot, challenging Maine's Secretary of State Shenna Bellow's final order

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US Prepared for All Contingencies in Red Sea, Hopes for Diplomatic Solution - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready for all contingencies amid the escalation of the situation in the Red Sea, however, Washington hopes that a diplomatic solution

will be reached, a senior Biden administration official said.

"We are prepared for all contingencies," the official said on Wednesday. "Of course, we hope through diplomacy and other means to contain the crisis to the extent we can."

Earlier in the day, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said that Yemen's Houthis attacked several merchant ships in the southern Red Sea with ballistic missiles launched but that no damage had been reported.

Later that week, the commercial vessel Hangzhou was attacked twice, CENTCOM said, adding that US helicopters had sunk the attacking vessels.

The Houthis have intensified their attacks on cargo ships carrying goods to Israel and have vowed to continue the attacks until Israel ends its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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Trump Asks Supreme Court to Overturn Colorado Decision to Disallow Him on Ballot -Filing

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"The question of eligibility to serve as President of the United States is properly reserved for Congress, not the state courts, to consider and decide. By considering the question of President Trump's eligibility and barring him from the ballot, the Colorado Supreme Court arrogated Congress' authority," wrote Trump's attorneys in the petition for Writ of Certiorari.

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Since November 23, Houthis Attacked Commercial Vessels 23 Times - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Yemen's Houthis have attacked vessels in the Red Sea 23 times since mid-November, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"Since November 19, Houthi rebels from Yemen have attacked commercial vessels 23 times," the official said.

The official called Houthi attempts to tie their attacks to the situation in Gaza an illegitimate justification.

"The attacks the Houthis are launching in the Red Sea are indiscriminate, targeting ships most of which have had absolutely no connection whatsoever to Israel," the official said.

Earlier in the day, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) said that several merchant ships in the southern Red Sea had been attacked by ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis, adding that no damage had been reported.

Last week, the USS Gravely shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles in the Red Sea in response to a Houthi attack on the Singapore-flagged ship Hangzhou of Danish shipping

company Maersk, CENTCOM stated. Later that week, the commercial vessel Hangzhou was again attacked by the Houthis, CENTCOM said, adding that US helicopters had sunk the attacking vessels.

After the armed conflict between Israel and Palestinian movement Hamas broke out in October, the Houthis have intensified their attacks on cargo ships it believes to be linked to Israel in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, vowing to continue the attacks until Israel ends its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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UN Reaffirms Importance of Safety, Security in Red Sea Region - Official

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has called for safety and security in the Red Sea region, the Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khiari told Security Council members.

"We reaffirm the importance of ensuring safety and security of maritime navigation in the region. In that regard, we also call for the immediate release of the 'Galaxy Leader' and her crew which was seized by the Houthis on 19 November," Khiari said during a meeting on the Red Sea on Wednesday.

Such incidents in the Houthi- controlled areas of Yemen have to stop, he added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said that the Houthis attacked several merchant ships in the southern Red Sea with ballistic missiles but no damage has been reported.

Later that week, the Houthis attacked the commercial vessel Hangzhou and US helicopters sank the attacking vessels, CENTCOM said.

The Houthis have vowed to continue attacking commercial ships bound for Israel until that country ends its military actions against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

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Explosion in Kerman Appears Consistent With Terrorist Attack - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - An explosion at Iranian General Qasem Soleimani's memorial site in the city of Kerman appears consistent with a terrorist attack, a senior Biden administration official said.

"It does look like a terrorist attack," the official said on Wednesday, when asked about the incident.

The attack resembles operations undertaken by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) in the past, the official said.

Earlier on Wednesday, 95 people were killed and 188 others injured by two explosions at

Soleimani's burial site in Kerman, during a ceremony marking the fourth anniversary of his assassination by US forces.

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US Not Working to Escalate Conflict With Houthis in Yemen - Senior Administration Official

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States does not intend to escalate the conflict with Houthis in Yemen, a senior Biden administration official said.

"We have pursued a very deliberate, diplomatic campaign, a very deliberate economic campaign, including sanctions, and a very deliberate defensive military campaign," the official said on Wednesday. "We are not working to act in any way in an escalatory manner."

Houthis have attacked commercial vessels 23 times since November 19, the official said.

The United States is acting in self-defense to protect global commerce and international shipping, the official added.

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US House Speaker Johnson Says Republicans Will Win White House, Both Chamber of Congress

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - House of Representatives Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters in Eagle Pass, Texas, that he thinks the United States will have a Republican president and majorities in both chambers of Congress after the 2024 elections.

"I think we're going to have a Republican president. I think we're going to win the Senate and we're going to expand the majority in the House," Johnson said on Wednesday.

Johnson was among 60 Republican lawmakers who visited the US border with Mexico earlier on Wednesday, where they continued to demand stricter immigration policies in exchange for backing Biden's emergency funding request for Ukraine.

The trip to the US southern border comes as the Senate engages in negotiations in hopes of striking a bipartisan deal that will include aid for Ukraine.

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Iran Calls on UN Chief, Security Council to Condemn Attack on Kerman - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - Iran is urging UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UN Security Council to condemn the attack on the Iranian city of Kerman during a

ceremony on the anniversary of the murder of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani.

"We urgently implore the Secretary-General and the Security Council to condemn this horrific terrorist attack unequivocally," the statement said on Wednesday.

The request is in line with the UN Secretary-General's stance against acts of terrorism, the statement said.

Iran blamed "the Zionist regime and its puppet terrorist groups" - referring to Israel - for the attack on Kerman.

Earlier on Wednesday, two explosions took place near Suleimani's burial site in Kerman during a ceremony marking the fourth anniversary of his death. Suleimani, who commanded the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, was killed by a US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020.

The Iranian authorities said 95 people were killed in the explosions in Kerman and 188 others were injured.

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RPT - US House Speaker Calls Situation at Border 'Unmitigated Disaster' of Biden's Own Design

(Repeats to fix day of week, typo in para 1)

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that the situation at the border with Mexico is an 'unmitigated disaster' of President Biden's own design.

"It's an unmitigated disaster, a catastrophe. And what's more tragic is that it's a disaster of the President's own design," said Johnson at a press briefing near Eagle Pass, Texas.

Johnson added that the situation is both heartbreaking and infuriating, noting that last month alone the US saw the most illegal crossings in history.

US media reported on Tuesday that officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December - the highest figure recorded in a single month.

Johnson led about 60 Republican Congressmen on a visit to the Mexican border where they continued to demand stricter immigration policies in exchange for backing Biden's emergency funding request for Ukraine.

The trip to Eagle Pass, Texas comes as the Senate engages in negotiations in hopes of striking a bipartisan deal.

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White House Refuses to Say if Administration Cut Off Communications With Menendez

WASHINGTON. January 4 (Sputnik) - White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre refused to say whether the Administration had cut off their contacts with US Senator Robert Menendez. "I am not going to get into any private discussions here at the White House," Jean-Pierre said. Menendez has been accused of receiving bribes in order to use his authority to assist the government of Qatar and benefit Egypt, the Justice Department said in an indictment earlier in the day.

The bribes included cash, gold, payments toward a home mortgage, compensation for a low-or-no-show job, a luxury vehicle and other things of value, the indictment said.

He also faces charges of conspiracy to commit bribery, conspiracy to commit honest services fraud, conspiracy to commit extortion under color of official right, and conspiracy for a public official to act as a foreign agent, according to the indictment.

Menendez, a Democrat from New Jersey, was indicted last year on federal corruption charges. According to prosecutors, Menendez allegedly used his official position to benefit three New Jersey businessmen and the Egyptian government in exchange for gold bars and cash, a luxury convertible and other gifts.

The Senator's wife Nadine Menendez, also known as Nadine Arslanian, acted as a go-between in the transactions, the federal prosecutors said.

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US Holding UNSC Members 'Hostage' by Covering For Israel's Actions - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is holding the whole UN Security Council hostage over their cover-ups for Israel, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said.

"The US, covering for Israel's actions, is holding other members of the Security Council hostage, preventing us from adopting a resolution...", Nebenzia told the Security Council members during a meeting on the Red Sea on Wednesday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) –
TERRORIST ATTACK IN IRAN

* The number of victims of the terrorist attack on a mourning procession in the Iranian city of Kerman has increased to 188, Fars news agency reported on Wednesday, citing Iran's emergency medical service.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi in connection with the tragic consequences of the

terrorist attack in the city of Kerman, adding that the killing of civilians who visited a cemetery is "shocking in its cruelty and cynicism" and that Moscow condemns terrorism in all forms.

- * The instigators and executors of the deadly attack in Iran's Kerman, which took place during a mourning procession on the anniversary of the death of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Gen. Qasem Suleimani, will be identified by Iran's security forces and punished, Raisi said.

- * UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns the attacks on a memorial ceremony in Kerman and calls for accountability for the perpetrators, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

- * The United States was not involved "in any way" in explosions that took place earlier in the day in the Iranian city of Kerman and Washington has no reason to believe Israel was involved either, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MIDDLE EAST

- * The Israeli attack on the southern suburb of Beirut will not go unanswered, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said on Wednesday.

- * The US intelligence community is "confident" that Hamas and other Palestinian military groups used Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza to hold some of the hostages and as a command center for their operations against Israel following the October 7 attack, The Associated Press reported on Wednesday citing a new intelligence assessment.

- * The United States was not given advanced notice about the drone strike that killed a senior Hamas official in Lebanon, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said

HOUTHIS ATTACKS IN RED SEA

- * The United States and its allies, including Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, issued a joint statement on Wednesday demanding the Houthis stop attacking commercial vessels in the Red Sea and a prompt release of the ones they have detained.

- * Yemen's Ansar Allah rebel movement, also known as the Houthis, said on Wednesday that it had attacked a Maltese-flagged container ship, which was heading to Israel.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * A total of 248 Russian military personnel have been returned from Ukrainian captivity through the mediation of the United Arab Emirates, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday, adding that the servicepeople would be sent for treatment and rehabilitation.

- * The secretary general of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Helga Maria Schmid, took the side of Kiev by not condemning Saturday's Ukrainian attacks on Russia's Belgorod, the Permanent Mission of Russia to the OSCE said.

- * The French Foreign Ministry did not condemn Saturday's Ukrainian attacks on the Russian city of Belgorod, calling them an action of "legitimate defense".

- * US weapon deliveries for Ukraine would have to be halted in the event that Congress fails to reach an agreement on further military assistance for Kiev, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said.

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US House Speaker Calls Situation at Border 'Unmitigated Disaster' of Biden's Own Design

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Friday that the situation at the border with Mexico is an 'unmitigated disaster' of President Biden's own design.

"It's an unmitigated disaster, a catastrophe. And what's more tragic is that it's a disaster of the President's own design," said Johnson at a press briefing near Eagle Pass, Texas.

Johnson added that the situation is both heartbreaking and infuriating, noting that last month alone the US saw the most illegal crossings in history.

US media reported on Tuesday that officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December - the highest figure recorded in a single month.

Johnson led about 60 Republican Congressmen on a visit to the Mexican border where they continued to demand stricter immigration policies in exchange for backing Biden's emergency funding request for Ukraine.

The trip to Eagle Pass, Texas comes as the Senate engages in negotiations in hopes of striking a bipartisan deal.

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UCLA Says Transforming Empty Mall Into Science Research Park - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) said on Wednesday that it will transform an empty mall into a research park with a focus on immunology and quantum science.

"UCLA has acquired the former Westside Pavilion shopping mall, which the university will transform into the UCLA Research Park - bringing together scholars and industry experts from around the world to create a nexus for discovery and innovation that will benefit Southern California and beyond," UCLA said in a statement.

The research park will house the California Institute for Immunology and Immunotherapy, as well as the UCLA Center for Quantum Science and Engineering, the statement said.

The project was funded with an initial \$200 million investment by the state of California, the statement said.

Construction at the site is expected to take approximately 40 months, California Governor Gavin Newsom said during a press conference on Wednesday. There will be an additional 24-month period to hire research personnel, Newsom said.

The former mall property includes 700,000 square feet of space, the statement said. The site includes a 12-screen movie theater that may be converted into lecture halls or performance spaces as well, the statement said.

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Imam Dead After Shooting Near New Jersey Mosque - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - An imam is dead after being shot outside near a mosque in Newark, New Jersey, ABC News reported on Wednesday.

According to the report, imam Hassan Sharif was found in the mosque's parking lot just after 6 a.m. with several gunshot wounds in his abdomen and arm. Sharif was taken to nearby University Hospital in critical condition but later died.

Investigators are scouring security and municipal street cameras to determine if the assailant can be identified, the report said, citing local law enforcement. Detectives told ABC that they may have found footage showing someone entering the parking lot before running away. Additionally, evidence such as bullet casings are being analyzed for any clues.

Sharif is said to be a well-known fixture in the Newark area, according to the report, and has been seen delivering prayers at council meetings and associating with city leadership.

Currently, investigators are uncertain about what motivated the shooting, said the report, citing officials, and there is currently nothing suggesting bias played a role in the crime.

Newark Police and the Essex County Prosecutor's office are handling the investigation, which is ongoing.

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Biden 'Absolutely' Confident in Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas - White House

WASHINGTON, JANUARY 3 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden remains "absolutely" confident in Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and considers the efforts to impeach him to be baseless, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"Absolutely, the president has confidence in the secretary," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

Biden considers the efforts taken by the Republicans in the House of Representatives to be baseless and unfortunate, Jean-Pierre said.

"There is no time for that right now," she added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the chair of the US House Homeland Security Committee said that the panel will hold its first impeachment hearing on Mayorkas January 10, according to the media reports.

Mayorkas is accused of misusing taxpayer funds and ignoring border security measures.

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Kirby Says US Talking to Partners on Future Recovery Needs of Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is in talks with its partners on the reconstruction needs of Ukraine postwar, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Wednesday when asked whether Washington supports giving Russia's frozen assets to Ukraine.

"We are still talking to partners about what reconstruction and recovery needs to look like in Ukraine after the war," Kirby said.

If the West is ready for a dialogue with Russia on the mutual exchange of frozen assets, Moscow is open to such a conversation, the director of the Department of Economic Cooperation at the Russian Foreign Ministry, Dmitry Birichevsky, told Sputnik at the end of December.

The incoming signals from the United States and the European Union can hardly be called optimistic, he added, citing Western countries' attempts to create a legal basis for seizing Russian frozen assets.

On December 21, the New York Times reported that the United States and its European allies renewed discussions to go after \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets and use them to aid Ukraine.

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US Amphibious Ready Group Led by USS Bataan Moved to Eastern Mediterranean - White House

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - A US amphibious ready group led by the assault ship Bataan (LHD-5) has left the Persian Gulf and moved to the Eastern Mediterranean after spending five months in the region, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"That amphibious ready group led by the assault ship USS Bataan was moved into the Eastern Mediterranean in the recent days coinciding with the departure the aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford," Kirby said.

The Baatan and the dock landing ship Carter Hall arrived in the Red Sea from the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal in August.

The Defense Department announced reinforcement plans for its Persian Gulf-stationed fleet in July, citing alleged Iranian threats to international navigation.

The defense Department said the Bataan and Carter Hall will join the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer Thomas Hudner of the US Fifth Fleet, whose area of operation encompasses approximately 2.5 million square miles and includes parts of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

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RPT- Canada Reiterates Nationals Must Leave Lebanon Amid Escalation With Israel – Advisory

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Canada's travel advisory agency on Wednesday reiterated its advice to nationals and permanent residents that they must immediately depart Lebanon amid the latest escalation with Israel.

"On January 2, 2024, explosions caused by suspected drone strikes occurred in the Dahiyeh district of Beirut, resulting in casualties. The attacks appear to be related to the ongoing conflict in the region and could lead to an escalation of hostilities in Lebanon," the updated advisory said. "If you are in Lebanon, including in Beirut: be extremely vigilant and aware of your surroundings. book a flight to leave the country."

Ottawa has been advising its citizens to leave Lebanon through commercial means while they remain available since October 2023.

Among other recommendations, the agency said individuals must carry identification documents at all times, avoid areas bordering Syria and Israel, ensuring travel documents are up to date, and register through the Registration Canadians Abroad service.

"If you intend to travel to Lebanon despite the advisory. you should consult local authorities and/or experienced local partners, plan a secure route, and monitor the security situation where you are traveling," the agency added.

On Tuesday, a Hamas office in Beirut's southern suburbs was targeted in an attack believed to have been carried out by an Israeli drone. At least six people died in the attack, including Hamas's deputy political leader Sale al-Arour and two Hamas military commanders. Lebanon's interim prime minister blamed the attack on Israel.

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US Labor Agency Concludes SpaceX Fired Workers For Criticizing Musk - Law Firm

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has concluded that SpaceX illegally fired nine workers who criticized the company's chief executive Elon Musk, the Lieff Cabraser & Burgess law firm said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has concluded its investigation and issued a complaint against the company alleging 37 separate violations of law. The charges stem from the company's response to the employees' letter to SpaceX's executive team, which expressed concern about allegations of sexual harassment by CEO Elon Musk, and his harmful behavior on Twitter that hurt the company's reputation, infected the company culture and created a toxic work environment," the statement said.

The NLRB investigation found that in response to the employee letter, SpaceX "launched a campaign of intimidation and coercion" and ultimately "fired nine employees for their involvement in the letter," the statement added.

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US Position to See Ukraine Achieve Victory Over Russia Has Not Changed - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The United States has not changed its position on the conflict in Ukraine and wants to see Kiev achieve a total victory against Russia rather than just be in a stronger position to negotiate, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"No, that's not true," Miller said when asked to confirm whether the United States' position on the conflict in Ukraine has changed.

Politico reported in December, citing a White House official and a Washington-based EU diplomat, that the United States and the European Union are looking to shore up Ukraine's position in potential future negotiations with Russia by ending the war with a shift in focus away from the unrealistic goal of Ukraine achieving a complete military victory over Russia.

Ukraine's failed counteroffensive, as well as Russia's military successes on the battlefield in 2023, have caused many European and US politicians to speak more cautiously about the prospects of victory over Russia, which becomes especially relevant in the absence of additional funding for Kiev from both Brussels and Washington.

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US, Israel Not Involved in Explosions in Iranian City of Kerman - State Dept.

(Updates with latest information in para 3)

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The United States was not involved "in any way" in explosions that took place earlier in the day in the Iranian city of Kerman and Washington has no reason to believe Israel was involved either, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"The United States was not involved in any way and any suggestion to the contrary is ridiculous," Miller said during a press briefing. "We have no reason to believe that Israel was involved in this explosion."

Earlier in the day, Iranian media reported that at least 103 people had been killed and another 211 injured as a result of two explosions at the entrance to the cemetery in the Iranian city of Kerman where Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, is buried. Soleimani was killed by a US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020.

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Weapon Deliveries to Ukraine Would End If Congress Fails to Reach Deal – White House

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – US weapon deliveries for Ukraine would have to be halted in the event that Congress fails to reach an agreement on further military assistance for Kiev, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"They'd have to ... the President [Joe Biden] signed out the last security assistance package for which we had replenishment authority funds. That's it," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We need to supplement passed so that we can provide additional security assistance to Ukraine".

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Ottawa has been advising its citizens to leave Lebanon through commercial means while they remain available since October 2023. Among other recommendations, the agency said individuals must carry identification documents at all times, avoid areas bordering Syria and Israel, ensuring travel documents are up to date, and register through the Registration Canadians Abroad service.

"If you intend to travel to Lebanon despite the advisory. you should consult local authorities and/or experienced local partners, plan a secure route, and monitor the security situation where you are travelling," the agency added On Tuesday, a Hamas office in Beirut's southern suburbs was targeted in an attack believed to have been carried out by an Israeli drone. At least six people died in the attack, including Hamas's deputy political leader Sale al-Arouf and two Hamas military commanders. Lebanon's interim prime minister blamed the attack on Israel.

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US Was Not Informed in Advance About Killing of Hamas Official In Lebanon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The United States was not given advanced notice about the drone strike that killed a senior Hamas official in Lebanon, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday during a press briefing.

"We were not informed in advance," Miller said, when asked whether the US was alerted ahead of the strike.

On Tuesday, a Hamas office in Beirut's southern suburbs was targeted in an attack believed to have been carried out by an Israeli drone. At least six people died in the attack, including Hamas's deputy political leader Saleh al-Arouri and two Hamas military commanders. Lebanon's interim prime minister blamed the attack on Israel.

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US Court Will Begin Releasing Names Linked to Jeffrey Epstein Case on Wednesday - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the Southern District of New York will soon begin releasing names linked to cases involving alleged sex crimes by Jeffrey Epstein, according to a court order filed Wednesday.

However, two of the people set to be named in the case requested the court keep their names sealed due to an alleged risk of physical harm.

"With the exception of the documents relating to these Does, the parties have informed the Court that they will begin filing the unsealed records outlined in this Court's December 18 Order later today," the filing said.

The court will decide whether to release the names of the Does in "due course," the filing added.

Filings with the names will be uploaded on Wednesday to public records systems, a court official told Sputnik.

Last month, a federal judge ordered the release of nearly 200 names tied to the Epstein case, including accusers and witnesses. Epstein, a convicted sex criminal, died in 2019 while awaiting trial on new sex trafficking charges. Authorities claim that Epstein committed suicide, although his death has been the subject of scrutiny and conspiracy.

Epstein, who worked in the financial sector, maintained ties to a number of celebrities and public officials. Epstein owned private islands in the Caribbean Sea, where he would frequently fly associates, fueling speculation about potential criminal activities there.

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US Air Force Orders 1,500 StormBreaker Stand-Off Missiles From Raytheon - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has awarded Raytheon a \$345 million contract to produce and deliver more than 1,500 StormBreaker air-launched, precision, stand-off smart missiles, the company announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"The US Air Force awarded Raytheon, an RTX business, a \$345 million contract to produce and deliver more than 1,500 StormBreaker smart weapons," the release said.

Raytheon described the Stormbreaker system as a "leading air-to-surface, network enabled weapon that can engage moving targets in all weather conditions" using its multi-effects warhead and tri-mode seeker, the release said.

The StormBreaker system is deployed on the F-15E Strike Eagle and F/A-18E/F SuperHornet with testing underway on all variants of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the release added.

Across all these platforms, StormBreaker completed 28 test drops in 2023, according to the release.

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RFK Jr. Secures Utah Ballot Access, Says Intends to Appear on Ballots in All 50 US States

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Independent 2024 US presidential candidate Robert Kennedy Jr. (RFK Jr.) said on Wednesday that his campaign secured ballot access in the state of Utah, and that he intends to appear on ballots in all 50 states.

"We will be on the ballot in 50 states and the District of Columbia," Kennedy said during a speech in Utah.

Kennedy confirmed that his campaign met ballot access requirements in Utah, making it the first state in which he can officially file as a presidential candidate. The campaign expects to have to engage in litigation in numerous states to achieve ballot access, Kennedy said.

Kennedy also criticized attempts by state and court officials to block former US President Donald Trump's ballot access. Kennedy said that he wants to beat Trump and Biden in a fair election.

In December, a Monmouth University poll found that 21% of registered US voters will definitely or probably vote for Kennedy in 2024.

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US, Israel Not Involved in Explosions in Iranian City of Kerman - State Dept.

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"The United States was not involved in any way and any suggestion to the contrary is ridiculous," Miller said during a press briefing. "We have no reason to believe that Israel was involved in this explosion."

Earlier on Wednesday, about 211 people died and several hundred more were injured as a result of explosions near the burial site of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in the Iranian city of

Kerman on the fourth anniversary of his assassination by the United States.

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US, Allies Warn Houthis Against Further Attacks in Red Sea, Demand Release of Vessels

(Updates with more details, background in paras 5-9)

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies, including Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, issued a joint statement on Wednesday demanding the Houthis stop attacking commercial vessels in the Red Sea and a prompt release of the ones they have detained.

"We hereby reiterate the following and warn the Houthis against further attacks: Ongoing Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are illegal, unacceptable, and profoundly destabilizing," the statement said. "There is no lawful justification for intentionally targeting civilian shipping and naval vessels."

The countries also called for a prompt release of all the detained vessels and personnel, the statement said.

"The Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences should they continue to threaten lives, the global economy, and free flow of commerce in the region's critical waterways," the statement said. "We remain committed to the international rules-based order and are determined to hold malign actors accountable for unlawful seizures and attacks."

The allies characterized the Houthis' attacks as a "direct threat" to the freedom of navigation in one of the world's most vital waterways, the statement said.

"These attacks threaten innocent lives from all over the world and constitute a significant international problem that demands collective action," the statement said. "Nearly 15 percent of global seaborne trade passes through the Red Sea, including 8% of global grain trade, 12 percent of seaborne-traded oil and 8% of the world's liquefied natural gas trade."

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said that the Houthis attacked several merchant ships in the southern Red Sea with ballistic missiles but no damage has been reported.

Later week, the Houthis attacked the commercial vessel Hangzhou and US helicopters sunk the attacking vessels, CENTCOM said.

The Houthis have vowed to continue attacking commercial ships bound for Israel until that country ends its military actions against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

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Congresswoman Omar Introduces Legislation to Block US Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia, UAE

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar introduced a pair of resolutions to block arms sales by the United States to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), due to alleged misconduct by the two Middle Eastern countries.

The resolutions express congressional disapproval of foreign military sales of a variety of defense equipment to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The legislation prohibits the issuance of a license to export the military equipment to either country.

"These sales go directly against our values as well as the cause of peace and human rights," Omar said in a statement, as quoted by US media.

It is "unconscionable" for the United States to sell arms to Saudi Arabia due to their alleged targeting of dissidents and support of slavery, Omar said.

Omar also criticized the UAE for purportedly violating a UN arms embargo by providing equipment to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, as well as for giving arms to Ethiopia, despite alleged atrocities in the Tigray region.

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Argentina Calls on UK to Renew Talks Over Disputed Malvinas Islands – Foreign Ministry

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – Argentina reaffirmed on Wednesday its sovereignty over the disputed Malvinas Island otherwise known as “Falklands” and called on the United Kingdom to renew negotiations on its future, the Argentinean Foreign Ministry said.

“The Argentine Government once again expresses its willingness to resume bilateral negotiations in order to find a solution to this sovereignty dispute, in accordance with the relevant UN General Assembly resolutions,” the Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The Ministry highlighted Buenos Aires’s readiness to maintain a “mature relationship” with the UK throughout substantive and constructive dialogue in regard to matters of mutual interest, while also creating the necessary trust for the resumption of talks on the disputed islands.

Argentina is convinced that the only solution to the dispute will come via diplomatic means, the Ministry said, adding that it remains interested in the Good Offices mission determined by the UN General Assembly which tasks the Secretary General with helping in the prompt and peaceful resolution of the conflict.

In 1833, Argentina lost control over the Archipelago it had inherited from the Spanish Crown following the country’s independence. In 1982 the dispute led to the War of Malvinas (Falklands War) between Argentina and the UK. The then ruling Military Junta had sought to regain control over the islands throughout military means.

Following over two months of hostilities, important naval and air losses, as well as hundreds of casualties and thousands of wounded in both sides, Argentina was defeated by the responding Royal Navy fleet dispatched by London to reassert its control over the disputed islands.

Buenos Aires has never recognized British sovereignty over the Malvinas and continues to see the events as an unlawful occupation in contradiction with international law.

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US House Panel Says Cartels Earning \$32Mln Per Week From Migrants in One Border Sector

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Mexican criminal cartels are earning \$32 million per week through the facilitation of illegal migration through just a single US Border Patrol sector in the state of Texas, the US House Judiciary Committee said on Wednesday.

"Border Patrol estimates that the cartels are earning \$32 million a week from illegal aliens in the Del Rio, Texas sector alone," the US House panel said in a statement via social media platform X.

The US Border Patrol's Del Rio Sector covers more than 55,000 square miles of Texas along the Rio Grande River and Lake Amistad.

US officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters at the southern border in December — the highest figure recorded in a single month — US media reported on Tuesday.

US lawmakers in the House of Representatives are pursuing an impeachment inquiry against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for allegedly misusing taxpayer funds and not enforcing border security measures.

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Mayorkas Says Will Cooperate With US House Impeachment Probe, Continue Working

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said on Wednesday that he intends to cooperate with an impeachment probe in the US House of Representatives, while also continuing his work as the Biden administration's border chief.

"I most certainly will," Mayorkas said during an interview with MSNBC, when asked whether he will cooperate with the congressional probe. "And I'm going to continue to do my work as well."

Earlier on Wednesday, US House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Mark Green said that the panel will hold its first impeachment inquiry hearing into Mayorkas on January 10.

The Homeland Security Committee's investigation found sufficient evidence to impeach Mayorkas for allegedly ignoring border security measures and misusing taxpayer funds, Green said.

The impeachment probe comes amid a record surge in illegal immigration via the United States' southern border. US media reported on Tuesday that officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December - the highest figure recorded in a single month.

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UN Chief Condemns Attack on Ceremony in Iran, Calls for Accountability - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 3 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns the attacks on a memorial ceremony in the Iranian city of Kerman and calls for accountability for the perpetrators, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns the attack today on a memorial ceremony in Kerman city in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which reportedly killed more than 100 people and injured many more," the statement said. "The Secretary-General calls for those responsible to be held accountable. "

Iran's Fars news agency earlier on Wednesday said the death toll in the attacks near the burial place of former Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani had risen to at least 188.

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Arkansas State Police Identifies Suspect in Fatal Officer-Involved Shooting - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Arkansas State Police (ASP) said on Wednesday that

they have identified Aaron Watson of Hot Springs as the individual who died in an officer-involved shooting earlier in the week.

"Arkansas State Police has named Aaron T. Watson, 35, of Hot Springs as the suspect killed in an officer-involved shooting that occurred the afternoon of Monday, January 1, 2024," ASP said in a statement.

The Saline County Sheriff's Office on Monday informed the ASP that they were pursuing a white car driven by Watson. Watson fired at the officers, who responded with their firearms killing him on the scene, the statement said.

ASP's Criminal Investigation Division is investigating the incident, the statement added.

An investigative case file will be presented to the prosecuting attorney, who will determine whether the use of deadly force was consistent with Arkansas law, according to the statement.

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Bomb Found on California's Pajaro Dunes Beach During New Year's Eve - Sheriff

SANTA CRUZ, January 3 (Sputnik) - A bomb team was called to California's Pajaro Dunes beach during New Year's Eve and removed an inert military ordinance there, the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.

"On New Year's Eve, our bomb team was called out to the Pajaro Dunes. The recent storms washed up what was determined to be an inert military ordnance," the statement said.

The bomb team deemed the situation safe but removed the bomb from the beach out of an abundance of caution, the statement added.

Pajaro Dunes, situated along the Monterey Bay coastline, experienced 40-foot waves last week that caused flooding in the low-lying coastline regions.

Santa Cruz County issued precautionary warnings, advising residents in multiple coastal areas to be prepared for potential evacuation.

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US Teenager Beats Tetris for First Time in Game's Three Decades of Existence

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - A teenager in the US state of Oklahoma claims to have beaten Tetris for the first time since the game debuted more than three decades ago, according to footage of the feat published on video sharing platform YouTube.

The teenager, 13-year-old Willis Gibson, posted a video on Tuesday, in which he crashed the game after reaching level 157, known as the "kill screen." Previously, only artificial intelligence (AI) was able to reach the kill screen.

The feat took Gibson approximately 38 minutes. Gibson has been playing Tetris since he was

11 and has competed in multiple gaming tournaments. Gibson also managed to break several other world records for the game, including reaching the highest overall score.

Tetris was developed by Soviet computer engineer Alexey Pajitnov and debuted on Nintendo systems in 1989. For years, players believed it was impossible to get past level 29. However, in 2010, competitive gamer Thor Aackerlund managed to reach level 30 using a new controller technique called hypertapping.

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Several US State Capitols Evacuated Due to Threats - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Several US state capitols were evacuated due to threats against officials, including the Kentucky capitol building, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear said on Wednesday.

"While everyone is safe, Kentucky State Police has asked everyone to evacuate the state Capitol and is investigating a threat received by the Secretary of State's Office. We are aware of similar threats made to other offices across the country," Beshear said in a statement via social media platform X.

The Mississippi, Michigan, Georgia and Connecticut capitols also received threats that led to evacuations, according to local media reports. The incidents may have involved bomb threats, the reports said.

The threat to the Georgia capitol was deemed a hoax and the building was reopened, reports said.

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US Buys Up to 3 Mln Barrels Of Crude Oil For April Deliveries – Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – The United States announced its decision on Wednesday to purchase up to 3 million barrels of crude oil for April deliveries.

"The Department of Energy, Strategic Petroleum Reserve Project Management Office (SPRPMO), located at 900 Commerce Road, East, New Orleans, Louisiana, has a requirement to conduct a purchase of up to three (3) million barrels of United States produced sour crude oil for April 2024 delivery," US Department of Energy said in a statement.

The delivery will be made to the Big Hill Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) site in Texas on April 1-30, 2024, it added.

The minimum offer quantity is 300,000 barrels, according to the statement. Potential offerors have to provide their initial proposals by January 10, it added.

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Shooting in New Jersey's Mosque Leaves Imam in Critical Condition- Reports

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - The mosque shooting on Wednesday morning in the US state of New Jersey has left its imam in critical condition, US media reported.

An imam, who was shot outside the mosque in Newark this morning, was taken to University Hospital, ABC New reported.

Newark Public Safety Director Fritz Fragé said that the shooting incident took place just after 6 a.m. outside Masjid Muhammad, and is currently under investigation, according to the media outlet.

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Two Americans Enter Deferred Prosecution Deal for Foreign Embassy PR Work - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - Virginia lobbyist Barry Bennett and New Jersey political consultant Douglas Watts have entered a deferred prosecution agreement after failing to comply with the Foreign Agents Registration Act by providing public relations services to a foreign government, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"A Virginia lobbyist [Bennett] and a New Jersey political consultant [Watts] each have entered into deferred prosecution agreements (DPAs) to resolve allegations that they failed to comply with the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and committed related offenses," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Bennett's companies in Washington and through the managing services of Watts received in 2017 about \$2.1 million from a foreign government for lobbying services to make a rival country look bad and to improve its relations with the United States, the release said.

Bennett agreed to be charged with two counts of falsification and concealment of material facts from the Department of Justice, but they will be dismissed with prejudice after the defendant amends his FARA filings and pays a \$100,000 fine, the release said.

At the same time, Watts has been charged with three counts of acting as an agent of a foreign government without registering under FARA and making false statements to the FBI. The charges will also be dismissed with prejudice after he pays a \$25,000 fine and amends his FARA filings, the release added.

On Tuesday, the Washington Post reported that Bennett and Watts ran a media campaign on behalf of the Qatar government.

According to the report, Bennett served as an unpaid adviser to the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump, while Watts also worked with Bennett for the campaign of Ben Carson, a Republican presidential candidate back then.

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Biden to Hold First 2024 Campaign Event on January 6 - Deputy Campaign Manager

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will make his first public campaign appearance of the year on the third anniversary of the January 6 riot at the US Capitol, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing his deputy campaign manager.

"The president will make the case directly that democracy and freedom, two powerful ideas that united the 13 colonies and that generations throughout our nation's history have fought and died for a stone's throw from where he'll be Saturday, remains central to the fight we're in today," deputy campaign manager Quentin Fulks said.

Biden will deliver his January 6 speech near Valley Forge, the Revolutionary War site that housed George Washington and the Continental Army, the report said.

The president will then give a speech on Monday at Mother Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina, where nine parishioners were killed in a mass shooting in 2015, the report added.

Biden's campaign is expected to scale up its operations in the initial months of the year, aiming to reach full steam by the summer, according to the report.

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SpaceX Launches First Set of Satellites That Can Beam Signals to Smartphones - T-Mobile

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – SpaceX launched a Falcon 9 rocket that has the first set of satellites transferring signals directly from space to smartphones, the T-Mobile company announced on Wednesday.

"Today, T-Mobile announced that SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket launched the first set of Starlink satellites with Direct to Cell capabilities," the statement said.

The launch took place on January 2, and the satellites are in low-Earth orbit, it added.

T-Mobile expects that field testing of the new service can begin soon, and the service will leverage SpaceX's constellation of satellites with Direct to Cell technology and wireless network, according to the statement.

"With the new service, the goal is to eliminate worrying about mobile dead zones and lugging around expensive satellite phones — Un-carrier customers would be connected nearly everywhere they can see the sky, and in most cases, with the phone they already have," the company said.

T-Mobile said the company expects additional Starlink satellite launches with Direct to Cell capabilities in the future. Initially, the service will begin with text messaging, with voice and data coverage to follow in the coming years, it added.

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NATO to Help Coalition of Nations Buy 1,000 Patriot GEM-T Missiles – NSPA

WASHINGTON, January 3 (Sputnik) – The NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) announced on Wednesday that the military alliance will help a coalition of its members, including Germany, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain, to refill their stockpiles with up to 1,000 Patriot GEM-T missiles.

“The NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) will support a coalition of nations, including Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, and Spain, with a contract for a combined quantity of up to 1,000 Patriot Guidance Enhanced Missiles (GEM-T), if all options are exercised,” NSPA said in a press release.

The NATO agency awarded a contract to COMLOG, a joint venture a joint venture between American Raytheon and European MBDA, to expand its production capacity of GEM-T missiles in Europe, the release said.

According to Managing Director MBDA Thomas Gottschild cited in the release, the contract will enable MBDA to build a new production facility for Patriot missiles in Germany while the COMLOG facility is the only one of the kind that produces such missiles outside of the United States.